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SUBJECT: (C) Argentina: Nestor Kirchner Down, but Not Out

REF: BUENOS AIRES 75 AND PREVIOUS; BUENOS AIRES 61

CLASSIFIED BY: VilmaSMartinez, Ambassador, DOS, Exec; REASON: 1.4(B),
(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Former President and first spouse Nestor Kirchner (NK) is recuperating after undergoing emergency surgery for a partially blocked carotid artery. NK underwent a carotid endarterectomy, which involved temporarily introducing a shunt in his artery to redirect the blood flow to the brain and past the obstruction in order to repair the damaged artery. Argentine medical specialists predict a rapid recovery period, but caution that NK will need to take preventive steps, including trying to reduce his stress levels, a tall order for this consummate micromanager and political strategist. While NK may take his doctors' advice and reduce his public appearances in February, we expect to see him again in March when Congress reconvenes. Since the surgery, the Casa Rosada has portrayed a resilient Nestor, but some, even within his own party, perceive his political days are numbered. Despite wishful thinking from political opponents, it is still too early to count Nestor Kirchner out of the presidential race in 2011. End Summary.

Nestor's Health Scare

¶2. (C) The Casa Rosada, and Mission sources with direct access, report that former President and first spouse Nestor Kirchner (NK) is recovering well after undergoing emergency surgery for a blocked carotid artery on February 7. NK's health setback followed several intense political days for the First Couple due to the Central Bank saga (ref A) and speculations that NK used insider information to profit on the international currency market (ref B). Press reports indicate that mid-day February 7 NK began experiencing tingling and numbness in his left arm after exercising on the treadmill. (According to our Regional Medical Officer, these symptoms are symptomatic of a stroke.) NK underwent a carotid endarterectomy, which temporarily introduced a shunt in his artery to redirect blood flow to the brain and repair the blocked artery. After the nearly hour-long surgery, NK remained in intensive care until late morning February 9 and was released from the hospital February 10. Upon leaving the hospital, a drained and pale-looking NK told reporters that he was feeling "100 percent." The front page of paper-of-record "La Nacion" carried a photo of NK leaving the hospital, which prominently displayed his deep carotid scar.

¶3. (C) Undoubtedly, NK's health scare caused considerable stress for the President, who is highly dependent upon NK as her principal adviser. (The episode was also probably reminiscent for CFK of 2004 when NK, then Argentina's president, was hospitalized for gastric hemorrhaging. At the time, there were rumors that part of

his colon was removed because cancer was detected. In October 2009, rumors resurfaced that again he had been hospitalized for reasons varying from an irritable bowel to cardiac problems.) CFK stayed close by his side from the moment he began exhibiting symptoms and remained overnight at the hospital, according to press reports. Late into the night, the President was accompanied by the couple's two children, Maximo and Florencia, in addition to Chief of Cabinet Anibal Fernandez, Senate President Pro Tempore Jose Pampuro, Legal Secretary Carlos Zannini, and Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana, according to press reports.

The Medical Take

¶4. (C) The Regional Medical Officer (RMO) assesses that given NK's relatively speedy release, it appears that his doctors addressed the problem in time. With a mild stroke, generally there is no long-term impairment. Nonetheless, the RMO notes that NK could have suffered some loss of brain tissue and functioning, but it is still too early to determine long-term damage. Local Argentine doctors predict that NK will recover rapidly, but note that he needs to take steps to prevent another episode, such as taking anti-clotting medication and reducing his stress. Deputy director of Argentina's Secretariat of Intelligence (SIDE) Francisco Larcher told Embassy officers February 10 that NK would face several

restrictions. He said NK would need to tighten his (already strictly controlled) dietary regimen by eliminating salt; monitor his blood pressure; and take an aspirin daily. ("La Nacion" reported February 8 that prior to the episode NK was known to take multiple aspirins daily.) In addition, he will have to dial back his exercise plan for a while, easing back into it by walking a little each day.

Business as Usual for the Casa Rosada

¶5. (C) Since the surgery, CFK and Casa Rosada spokespersons have portrayed government activities continuing as normal and NK recovering rapidly. To that end, the day after the surgery, CFK made an unplanned appearance at a grocery store's inauguration. She assured the crowd that NK was doing well and that he was in "perfect condition" to resume leadership of the Peronist party in March. She reportedly maintained a full agenda on February 9 and during a Casa Rosada event that day quipped: "we have Kirchner for a little longer" after confirming that he had been released from intensive care. Additionally, at a February 11 public rally to inaugurate the taxi union's new headquarters, CFK put NK's health into soccer terms, stating: "Nestor Kirchner never left the field nor will he leave the field; he is on the bench a few days because he is injured."

Muted Public Reaction

¶6. (C) Public reaction to NK's health scare has been muted, perhaps as a result of early assurances from government sources that the procedure was basic and had gone well. NK's well-wishers were evident in large numbers, but his scare did not appear to generate a deep non-partisan wave of sympathy or concern. There were reports (and, from government-allied media, criticism) of chain-mails on the Internet celebrating Kirchner's health problems and expressing the desire that he die.

The Caged Lion

¶7. (C) NK, who thrives on politics, will almost certainly be a difficult patient. Press reports indicate that shortly after the operation he was antsy to leave the hospital and resume his routine. Left-leaning, government-allied "Pagina 12" described him as feeling like a caged lion. "La Nacion" noted that after leaving the hospital he received a "dossier" with the latest political and economic updates. The paper notes that the joke circulating Casa Rosada halls was "the same Nestor is back, he has started calling everyone." SIDE deputy director Larcher, who visited him at the hospital on February 10, told Ambassador Martinez that NK was receiving a number of people in his hospital room. Foreign Minister Taiana, one of the first to see NK after his surgery, told the Ambassador that NK was recuperating and in good spirits. Taiana said that while NK is eager to get back into the swing of things, if he were him he would take it easy, but that is not NK's style.

¶8. (C) While NK may heed his doctors' advice and maintain a low profile in February, we can expect to see him again in March. High on NK's agenda is attending the opening session of Congress March 1 and resuming the presidency of the Peronist party during a March 10 ceremony in Chaco province. (NK resigned from the presidency following his slate's second place finish in Buenos Aires province in the June 2009 midterms. He and his party followers argue that he now can resume the presidency because his resignation was never formally accepted by the party.)

An Uphill Battle for 2011?

¶9. (C) Despite the Casa Rosada's public manifestations of NK's resilience, the image of a physically debilitated NK appears to be signaling to some that his political days are numbered. The director of Banco Mariva, Enrique Antonini, told EconCouns February 9 that the business community's immediate reaction was that NK's health episode would increase the calculation among the strong Peronist mayors of Buenos Aires province that they cannot win with the Kirchners in the 2011 presidential race. As a result, the mayors will further distance themselves from the Kirchners, Antonini predicted. Additionally, a day after the surgery, one of NK's key challengers for the Peronist party presidential nomination--Santa Fe Senator Carlos Reutemann--quipped to journalists that "when they go in 2011...Argentines will be happy." While he later said his message was directed toward General Confederation of Labor Secretary General (and staunch Kirchner ally) Hugo Moyano, Reutemann's comments suggest he too believes NK's political prospects are diminishing.

Comment

¶10. (C) Despite wishful thinking from the Kirchners' political opponents, it is still too early to count Nestor Kirchner out of the 2011 presidential race. While his political drive will continue to test the limits of his physical capabilities, NK has a track record of bouncing back from health scares. As long as NK maintains his mental faculties, he will remain a force to be reckoned with on the road to 2011.

MARTINEZ